Note by LMB: This is the second of the two travel memoirs I wrote early in the decade; I wish I'd taken time to do more of these for other trips, as most of the details have leaked out of my memory in the intervening years. I see I was finally starting to learn to embed links in my essays, but I'm afraid some of them are now obsolete. Others, amazingly, are still going, including SFeraKon and Algoritam, who still faithfully publishes my books in Croatian.

Croatia 2002

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Monday afternoon, April 22, I left Minneapolis for Zagreb, with the usual four hours of sleep the night before–I never sleep well before a trip, nor can I sleep on airplanes, alas. But the connections were excellent–a direct flight from Minneapolis-St. Paul International, which is eleven minutes from my house, to Schiphol in Amsterdam, and a direct connection through there via Croatia Air to Zagreb. Schiphol is a vastly easier and less hectic airport to transit through than JFK or O'Hare. Despite Northwest's utterly miserable constricted torture seats (it was a full flight and I had a middle slot this time), it was one of the easiest flights I've taken lately. Everything ran on time for once. Happily, the Croatia Air seats in their nice new Airbus plane were notably more comfortable. It was a mere two-hour flight from the Netherlands to Zagreb; I caught just a glimpse of the Alps through the cloudy spring skies of Europe below.

This trip was sponsored jointly by Sferakon 2002 (www.sferakon.hr), the twenty-fourth of its line, for which I was to be GoH, and by my Croatian publisher, Algoritam, which has brought out ten of my Miles Vorkosigan series books in the Croatian language, with more planned. I breezed through Customs in the small Zagreb airport and was met right at the door by con chair Vlatko Juric-Kokic and Algoritam publisher Neven Anticevic. Vlatko had described himself, accurately, as very tall, and we had no trouble finding each other.

I was whisked by car from the airport, which lies on the outskirts of town, to the very heart of Zagreb. The Hotel Dubrovnik lies on the main square, Trg ban Josip Jelacic, of whom more anon, with which I was to become very familiar. Even better, the flagship Algoritam bookshop lies immediately next door to the hotel lobby entrance. (Why, yes, they have websites; *everything* has a website these days. The Hotel Dubrovnik's may be found at www.tel.hr/hotel-dubrovinik Algoritam's, which includes a page with pictures of all of my book covers, is at www.algoritam.hr). I was pleased to see a large

array of my books in Croatian in the glass pillar (a sort of freestanding display window) outside of the bookstore.

Neven negotiated me a room overlooking the square, with a postcard-fine view including the clock, the statue of the Ban, the fountain (which has a legend involving a knight and a maiden), and the intensely European, ever-fascinating tram lines. As a car-raised Midwesterner, I tend regard public transportation as an entrancing alien device with all the charm of a Disneyland ride, and I have to re-train myself how to use it every time I encounter it. The room was small and the bath, tiny, but newly-renovated and sparklingly clean, for all the little time I spent there. The view from my window all looked very nineteenth century, till I began noticing the satellite dishes tucked into every available niche on the ornate buildings.

I quickly learned that Neven knew his public relations techniques; he made interviewers spring up around me as though sown from dragon's teeth. The first of these was about two hours after I landed. We met the reporter, Mirjana Brabec, and dashed out to a café in the square for a quick taped interview and photo op. The inevitable "What do you think of Croatia?" question I could barely answer, on two hours' acquaintance with the country, but we did all right, and she was able to make her evening deadline. The full-page article came out promptly in a nationally distributed magazine called "Gloria" (Nr/broj 381, 26.travjja 2002, page 77). I gather it's aimed at women, as several fans at the con later that weekend were able to tell me that their mothers had seen it. (www.gloria.com.hr) The photo, with me sitting by the fountain holding one of my Algoritam titles and with the famous statue of the Ban Jelacic clearly discernable in the background, came out really well considering I'd had about four hours of sleep in the prior forty-eight.

In the US, the general-interest press seems to think science fiction writers are last week's chopped liver–inevitably, whenever I've had a little TV spot here in the States, the reporter has never read SF, though the cameraman always has. In Croatia, I seemed to actually be taken perfectly seriously as a writer. This seems to be something of a national habit–I saw more statues put up to writers than to generals in my ambles around the city. I can only approve.

The Ban Jelacic is an ambiguous national hero in Croatia. Like the rest of Europe, the region had its abortive revolutionary movements in 1848, and Jelacic was the general who put it down in Hungary on behalf of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Since Croatia had been conquered by the Austro-Hungarians, a certain amount of regional ill-will made the affair rather emotionally complicated. The statue of the Ban in the square had originally been set up facing Hungary. It was taken down and hidden away during the Communist regime in the late Yugoslavia, but dragged out and refurbished after

the fall of communism in 1989–and set up again turned around facing Serbia, to the south.

In the evening, Vlatko and Neven took me on a short walking tour of the upper town, the medieval-era Zagreb overlooking the more nineteenth-century part where my hotel lay. In that prior era, there were actually two cities, Kaptol and Gradec, on two adjoining hills, also known as "the Bishops' Town" and "the Merchants' Town." In the ultimate in balkanization, they had little wars across the creek at the Bloody Bridge, now a cobble-paved street, before they eventually gave up and merged into the town of Zagreb. We climbed some impressive staircases to some excellent views, then I had my first introduction to traditional Croatian food. There is a serious dedication to grilled meats here, with an appreciation of protein that is downright American, and the restaurants keep charcoal-fired grills and hearths to prepare it in the proper manner. We fetched up at one of these, sat in the garden section and squeezed in another interview, and lingered over an appetizer of noodles and cheese while waiting for the evening's grilling to be done. I made my first acquaintance with Croatian wines, which can be excellent, but are generally produced in small batches for home consumption and seldom exported. We then moved indoors where it was warmer and were presented with an enormous platter of fire-roasted meat and potatoes, and so ended Tuesday.

Wednesday kicked off with a short video interview in the bookshop, and a longer audio taped one with Daniela Komiso, a reporter for Radio 101. Afterward, Vlatko took me on a walking tour of the old city, now somewhat blurred in my mind with the tour I took Friday. But I did nail down a splendid, lavishly illustrated book titled, simply, *Zagreb*, which includes pictures of everything I saw and a good deal I'll have to return again in order to see. (ISBN 953-6469-01-4, if anyone wants to try interlibrary loan.) It, and another Zagreb history book also weighing about five pounds, served to replace the books I brought (and that Pat Wrede sent) for Vlatko, Neven, and the SF club library, so there was no net loss of books in my suitcase. (I should have packed more.) I did get a look in the Archeological Museum, quite near my hotel, with fascinating displays of Bronze Age, Greek, Roman, Celtic, and Slavic pottery, sculpture, coins, weapons, and jewelry. The museum's prize is an Egyptian mummy, purchased and brought home by a Croatian nobleman during the nineteenth-century era when such souvenirs were trendy, which proved to be wrapped in a long linen cloth bearing the best specimen anywhere extant of Etruscan writing. The cathedral in the upper town, much restored after a nineteenth-century earthquake, remains very much a working church. Its twin towers are a Zagreb landmark, visible for miles, as I discovered later on our trip to the hill castle of Medvedgrad on Monday.

Wednesday evening was the traditional Dinner With the Concom, in yet another splendid little restaurant perched on the hillside, reached via the stairs up to the old town. About twenty of us almost took over the little dining room, and bilingual conversation commenced. I was continually impressed by my Croatian hosts' command of English. In part this comes from their interest in SF, as only a fraction of the available work gets translated into Croatian. Croatian SF readers are just as avid as all others I've met, and would soon run out of books to read if they didn't sharpen their foreign language skills. In turn, the exercise improves their English, to my benefit; I felt I was able to carry on high-level and complex conversations about Sfnal and literary topics with little constraint practically throughout my stay.

Dinner was another wonderful platter of grilled and roast meats and potatoes, with a traditional dessert that the English-language menu translated as "pancakes," but which was more what we think of as crepes. About midnight I waddled off to my hotel to sleep, because I was getting up early for the one-day book tour.

Neven and my translator for the day, Ms. Vera Andrassy, picked me up at the hotel and we were off by car for the city of Rijeka, a town of about 200,000 on an inner curve of the Istrian coast of the Adriatic. This involved crossing both the fertile plains near Zagreb, and climbing up over the cool, rainy mountains between that inland city and the outer Istrian coast. About two-thirds of the distance is four-lane, the rest more traditional two-lane road. Along the old road, some of the restaurants along the way have their outdoor grills running so that passers by can see the meat turning on a spit, a nice piece of advertising, I thought. Croatian rules of the road deduced by my observations: 1) Guard rails are for sissies. 2) The center line is merely a suggestion. 3) Speed limits that are not enforced do not count. (*So,* I found myself thinking, *what* does *that 180 under the speedometer needle translate to in miles per hour? Do I really want to ask?)* Yes, we did pass some war damage en route, more sporadic than I would have expected, slowly healing. But the conversation along the way was good. Among other things, I discovered that Neven, who is just a few years younger than me, had learned some of his excellent English as an AFS exchange student to St. Louis, MO, way back when, and that Vera had once taught languages in California. Since my daughter had been an AFS student to the Netherlands in high school, as well, and we later hosted a boy from Belgium, it seemed a pleasant connection.

The area around Zagreb looks like central Europe, but as one approaches the coast the landscape swiftly grows Mediterranean. Bony gray-white rocks poke through the rust red soil, and the sun comes out.

We arrived at the bookshop of Ante Russo, called *Nova,* in Rijeka, just in time for our program to commence. We set up on a little balcony overlooking the shop floor, nicely filled with Croatian SF shoppers, and Neven introduced me for a short talk. With Vera's able assistance we ran a question and answer session about my books and my work, with the help of a lot of good questions from the floor. I then moved down to a desk and signed books like mad for a time.

After that, Mr. Russo led us to lunch by the seaside at a place whose name translates "The Nereid." We sat out on a terrace mere meters from the beautiful clear water, with a fine view south over the bay and islands. I was introduced to Istrian seafood, all fresh-caught and wonderful, and some more superior Croatian wine. This is the sort of place where they bring you the catch of the day on a platter to look at, and you select your very own fish before it's cooked. I think we all could have sat there for about a week, in the golden light, but we had to tear ourselves away for another, shorter drive over the hills of Istria to the outer coast and the town of Pula, where another bookshop awaited, Castropola. (www.castropola.hr) There we were warmly welcomed by owner Magdalena Vodopija and her staff, and more reporters, camera crew, and a nice crowd of interested SF readers.

There we ran a similar Q&A program, with Vera translating the questions and my answers, and I signed yet more of my books in Croatian, chatted with English-speaking fans, and signed a little stock.

The tight schedule left little time for touring, but we did take a few minutes to walk past the Roman amphitheater, one of the best preserved in the region. It is still used for shows and concerts. We got there just in time to see the full moon rising through the stone arches. For just a moment, time stopped for us.

Though we were still full from lunch, the bookshop folks took us off to yet *another* fine restaurant for dinner. By this time I'd finally gathered my wits enough to begin collecting restaurant cards, so I can tell you it was the Kavana Ogledala at Flaciusova 20, Pula. It was decorated in a very 1920's Art Deco period style, which, though clearly recently refurbished, really felt as though it had been there for eighty years. There (in addition to a Croatian merlot to die for) I was persuaded to try truffles for the first time in my life. Truffles, it turns out, grow in the region, so are (slightly) less insanely expensive there. Having eaten witchetty grubs in Australia and sushi on the West Coast, I figured it was my duty as a science fiction writer to seize the opportunity and try them. Besides, the sheer idea of being fed truffles by my publisher on a moonlit Mediterranean shore was deeply appealing.

My plate arrived with about a teaspoon of little brown lumps sprinkled over a plate of noodles in white sauce. Basically, in case anyone was wondering, truffles taste like strongly mushroom-flavored

tenderized rubber band bits. Interesting, but I'll wait till someone figures out how to grow them commercially, and the price comes down to the grocery store range. Dessert was a brilliant barely-sweet chocolate gateau with walnuts. As if the truffles and the company weren't enough, it was all rendered even more surreal by the Nat King Cole songs coming over the music system–to Vera's delight. Slightly older than I am, she clearly felt it was the proper civilized music of *her* era. I recommend the Kavana Ogledala, indeed I do.

At midnight, we arrived at what would likely be a very nice resort hotel, if one could see it in daylight, the Hotel Histria, presently filled with a large conference of Croatian English teachers. This was Neven's destination for the weekend, as Algoritam also publishes textbooks. I found the website (natch)–http://www.istra.com/zupan/cro/hot29.html

Alas, all I saw of it was the lobby and my room, as Vera and I had to get up at 6 AM the next morning and fly back from Pula on the only flight that day to Zagreb. But it was an uneventful thirty-five minutes in the air, and I thoroughly enjoyed Vera's conversation.

Usually, a visiting writer is insulated from knocks and jars by their anxious hosts, but it was pretty clear to me that Americans are actually welcome in Croatia. For anyone who's considering a Mediterranean vacation, I would recommend they take a look at the Istrian and Dalmatian coast; the water is clear, the seafood is splendid, and an astounding number of people speak at least some English. With some good will and an English-Croatian dictionary, I suspect one could get along rather well. And for history buffs, well, there's a feast of Greek, Roman, medieval, and other sites to see.

Vera and I were met at the Zagreb airport as arranged by two fans from Sferakon who were to be my guides and loyal minions for the day, Goran Malcic and Igor Tabak. After we dropped off Vera toward the upper town where she lived, and a brief stop back at the hotel for me to change clothes, it was off for more touring of the old city. We hit the churches, towers, and interesting old gates, then ducked into the Zagreb city museum, Musej Grada Zagreba, housed in the former convent of the Poor Claires. An excellent series of exhibits winding around two floors in chronological order made a fine concentrated history lesson, very useful to the first-time visitor. (Later, I learned that Vera had been responsible for some of the English-language caption translations on some of the exhibits there.) By that time, I was suffering from museum feet and the short night, so I went back to the hotel for a rest before Sferakon itself began.

Sferakon took place at the University of Zagreb's Faculty of Computer Science building. ("Fakultet elektrotehnike i racunarstva u Zagrebu.") The university does not have a campus proper as in the US, but rather, is distributed all over the city in various available buildings. (I couldn't imagine the challenges this would involve when

changing classes, but I'm told that the various faculties don't much exchange students.) Like St. Petersburg, Russia, Zagreb has preserved its beautiful central section, and has the new and ugly twentieth-century steel-box architecture in a sort of bathtub ring around the flat region to the south of town. (I wonder if Europeans realize that style was *designed* to be torn down and replaced after it starts moldering? I don't think disposable buildings are exactly in their worldview.) The computer science building is one of these. But the hallways and the several class and lecture rooms on its first floor made space enough to tuck the con into.

I found a comfy corner to sit and talk with fans and sign books, till my first formal programming item, and interview (in English, of course) at 10 PM conducted by Vlatko. To my surprise, we didn't bother with translation; all the attendees were expected to follow along in English, which, judging by the questions in the Q&A part, they were well able to do. I'm still deeply impressed that we could fill the room, a hundred to a hundred and fifty people, random fans, all speaking a second language well enough to carry on these complex conversations. Anyway, the interview seemed to go well, and I hung around for a bit and then Goran drove me back to my hotel for the night.

Saturday morning, I was pleased to find that my American and British friends in the area had all made it in. We all met for breakfast in the hotel's dining room. James Bryant had driven from England via Switzerland, where he had visited his sister, along with his 94-year-old father Jack and a friend of his father's, Richard Brett-Knowles, known to his familiars as B-K. I was later informed that this tall, thin, white-bearded gentleman, who looked rather like Don Quixote, had been in on the development of radar in WWII, and had spent time in Intelligence behind Nazi lines in Holland. Doug Muir, his German wife Claudia, and their six-week-old son had driven up from Belgrade, where Doug has been doing legal consulting. And Holly Hill, from my chat list, whom I had not met before, had flown over from Italy, where she serves as a military librarian. So we all made a splendidly cosmopolitan and convivial party.

At noon, I dressed up and went next door for my main bookshop signing. Upstairs, the Algoritam shop (Gajeva 1, Zagreb, if anyone wants the address) was devoted to magazines and computer games; downstairs was the printed page. The bookselling business has a peculiar structure in Croatia, some legacy from the former communist period: most of the publishing companies own their own bookstores. So Algoritam sells their own line (which, since they somehow managed to obtain *both Lord of the Rings* ***and*** Harry Potter, is no bad deal) and fills in with the most splendid collection of foreign language import books I've ever seen in one place.

We had what seemed to me an excellent signing: I started ten minutes before the hour and ended twenty minutes after the next hour, and we had a line going all the way up the stairs at one point. Of course, I do have this long, elaborate signature, the unfamiliar Croatian names were a challenge, and I couldn't resist appending "Zagreb 2002" on each, simply because it was so amazing to me to be there. So the time spent may not have been *only* because of the fans with bags o' books. Over my shoulder, I could hear Doug exclaiming gleefully over the stock he was finding.

Croatians include a lot of *very* tall fellows; I not infrequently found myself looking up, and up, to connect the name I was signing with a face pretty high in the air. I'm told the region fields some demon basketball teams. Me, I think it's the meat. Special thanks to all the people who were buying my books for their mothers; you are all *good* children. And, to the Family Pavetic, your heart from Zagreb has found a place in my glass cabinet in my dining room, along with my growing collection of mementos. (Including two Nebulas and two Locus awards, by the by, and the coffee mug from the former chief engineer of *USS The Sullivans*, so I think it's in good company.)

After the signing, I ducked back to the hotel for another interview with a journalist, quite a bright fellow with academic interests whose name I failed to write down, then returned to sign a bit of stock for another day. After that, it was time for a short rest and then back to the convention.

Saturday evening my talk/Q&A session centered on biotech aspects of my work, and James and Doug and Holly, who lack my sense of misdirection and so had somehow all found their way to the right building all by themselves, did a fine job of priming the pump with suitable questions. I can only hope everyone else enjoyed it as much as I did. I helped hand out awards at the Sferacon awards ceremony, understanding not a word and feeling rather like Vanna White. (Whoever the very shy fan was who came up to me after that to say something, and whom we ruthlessly cut off because I was trying to get to my break, please e-mail me.) I hung out some more with the fans, and Vlatko sent out for pizza. This close to Italy, Croatian pizza is more in the authentic original style than some American pizza–I particularly noticed the real, hand-made crusts that seemed to be routine. About midnight, I was turning into a pumpkin, and had Goran drive me back once more to the hotel.

Breakfast Sunday was another delightful party. Around noon, Vlatko and a Croatian friend of Doug's and Vlatko's, Dragan Antulov from Split, came back and guided us all out for pastries in a street café. The gang included three Americans, a German, three Brits, and two Croatians, and the ages ranged from ninety-four down to six weeks. This *is* twenty-first century civilization. (And back in the 1960's we all thought we would be scrabbling in the radioactive rubble come

the twenty-first century., fighting off the mutants. I like this future much better, even if I did have to time travel to it the hard way.) I decided not to attempt the tram system by myself, as I had visions of getting myself lost someplace at the end of the line and not being able to find my way back in time. So afterwards, the visitors all walked to the upper town and strolled around. We got a photo of me with the charming bronze of the woman writer Marija Juric Zagorka, whose work sounds as though it would be just my speed. We finally fetched up in a beautiful little park for a time, while the elders rested on a bench and Claudia took care of the sprout.

I went back to the hotel for a short break, then Goran picked me up again and took me back to the con. By my program item that evening–I'd picked "Science Fiction versus Fantasy" for my topic du jour–I was really beginning to miss Mary Gentle, the British fantasy writer who'd had to cancel out due to illness, and I was sincerely hoping my audience wasn't getting as tired of the sound of my own voice as I was. But we had another pleasant, discursive conversation. The con was winding down by this time, so I seized some members of the concom, including Goran, Igor, and Daniel Ille and Jagoda Matovina, to take me out to dinner. We ended up in the traditional Croatian restaurant across from the cathedral (plates of roast meat! again!) and talked and ate and drank till nearly midnight. I collected some good Croatian army stories.

I note in passing, that when your nose starts bleeding, aspirin is no longer your friend.

At 8 AM the following morning, Monday, Neven had me scheduled for a live appearance on Croatian national TV morning show. I kept reminding myself that since Croatia was the size of West Virginia (according to their embassy website at http://www.croatiaemb.org/index.htm), this was just like local TV at home, and so tried to keep my stage fright under control. Neven drove me to the station, where I was whisked upstairs for a brief, lovely make-up job that replaced about twelve hours of sleep.

We tiptoed into the studio, where they were switching back and forth between live bits by the two hosts and recorded items. I was sat upon a large yellow couch with Neven, flanked by our two hosts, and got wired up to the simultaneous translator at his little desk in a dark corner. Note to myself in future–find out what the questions will be in advance. They had them listed on clipboards, lying right there, and I could have asked if I'd had my wits more about me, and had brief, witty replies all ready. Alas, the very first question arrived as I was having trouble with my ear bug, and was somewhat tangled in translation; the young lady, I found out later, had wanted to know if my children had inspired my writing, and it came out on my end as asking if I wrote for children. Which I don't. I explained at rather too much length–I'd been filling those convention hours all weekend–that

it was for ages twelve and up, with caution on the lower end. I have no idea how goofy I sounded translated back into Croatian. But everyone held up nobly despite the confusion, we got through a second question, and the time was up.

Neven took me back to the hotel, and Vlatko and Goran came and collected me for one last tour. After some debate, we decided on a trip by car up to Medvedgrad Castle, on the mountain overlooking the city. (I'm told the castle's name translates as "Bear Town"; the mountain, Medvednica, as "Bear Mountain," but we saw no bears. They do still exist in the Croatian mountains, however, according to the pictures in the book I got later.) This destination proved to be a superb choice. I even got my tram ride in, as we took it to where Goran's car was parked. (Parking in Zagreb, like most formerly medieval cities, is chaos: the old tag line, "If you don't like my driving, stay off the sidewalk!" is scarcely a joke there.)

Medvedgrad Castle is the usual interesting tumbled medieval ruin–it was built in 1250, and unoccupied after an earthquake in 1590. But it has a recent war memorial, and a spectacular view out across Zagreb and the plains to the south all the way to the Bosnian border. One can see the river Sava winding away below, all silvery, and there is no noise. In my American suburb, one is never out of the sound of engines–lawnmowers, snowblowers, cars, trains, jets overhead as often as every two minutes sometimes. Genuine stillness is almost never heard. We just sat for a while and listened to the silence, and watched the little brown striped lizards scuttle over the rocks. There are no lizards in Minnesota; their presence assured me I'd come to the right climate, oh yes. The fellows explained how they used to catch them when they were boys (grass lassos deployed at the openings of burrows). The site is surrounded by a large national park and nature preserve, all wooded slopes and steep ravines, giving a taste of the kind of isolation that must have been the norm in prior centuries.

At the exit from the park we stopped for lunch at yet another meat-grilling restaurant, this one with a wonderful view from its terrace down over the hills onto Zagreb. I managed to grab a card–it's called Sestinski Lagvic, if you're ever in Zagreb. (They have a website, natch. www.crotours.com/sestinski-lagvic You can see the steps we went up from the parking lot, the table where we sat, and, by golly, the amazing view.) Sheltered from the threat of rain by an awning, we tackled another platter of meat–quite the best yet–and watched the swallows dip and soar below us.

And then it was time for me to go back to the hotel and dress for the last blow-out. Neven had arranged an Algoritam launch party (he confused me for a time by pronouncing it "lounge party") for *Shards of Honor*, printed that weekend just barely in time to catch my visit. (I have an inner vision of just what sort of behind the scenes scrambling this must have entailed; my thanks to all who must have given up

their weekend and their sleep to make it happen.) Neven drove me up to the upper town where we found things being set up in a fine old building with decorations right out of the Austro-Hungarian empire phase. The hall, which must have been a small ballroom in its day, looked downright Barrayaran. I'm told it's called Preporodna dvorana (Revival Hall), as it was used by people belonging to a pan-Slavic movement back in the days of the Austrian domination. (OK, so maybe it's Komarran…)

Neven and I then did another taped interview for radio, and then folks were let in to fill the chairs. Vera arrived to translate for me, and we did the book presentation and another question and answer session, which, after all the practice we'd had, I thought went pretty well. I signed books for another heartening line of folks, and was presented with a gorgeous coffee table book on Croatian wildlife, possibly with the cunning plan of making me want to come back and see yet more of what I'd missed on the first lightning tour. (Thank you, Andrea Radcic, wherever you are.) I then found my way to the hall downstairs where the food was spread out, in time for a glass of wine, a nibble, and a few more interesting conversations.

And then it was time to crawl back to my hotel, pack, and get ready for my morning flight back to Minneapolis. Goran the Faithful drove me to the airport and got me checked in, and we had time to sit in the café for a last cup of tea and conversation about WWII military history. I got a window seat this time, for one last view of the area before the clouds drew a veil over it all.

My seatmate on the flight from Schiphol to Minneapolis proved interesting–a woman doctor from San Diego who was involved in a charity mission to children of Chernobyl, the object being to get the kids out on summer visits to the States, feed them up and boost their immune systems. She was looking forward to having the little girl she was to host this coming summer. (Key a little Twilight Zone music re: my earlier reflections about scrabbling in the radioactive rubble.) My son picked me up at the airport and whisked me home, where I found 260 e-mails waiting. Fortunately, about 200 of them were Korean spam, and could be immediately deleted. After a long, long day, I fell at last, gratefully, into bed, eight days after I had left.

(My word processing program is declining to cooperate in producing international characters. My apologies to all persons, places, and statues who have had these graceful, mysterious decorations left off their names, above.)